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THE FUTURE OF FRENCH ART*

BY LÉON BONNAT

The following note precedes an article by Monsieur Léon Bonnat, president this year of the Institute of France, in a recent number of *La Renaissance*, an important political, literary and artistic Paris Review, under the general title *Vers une France nouvelle*, with the sub-heading *La France d'après La Guerre*. It is one of a series of articles to which, in previous issues, the following eminent Frenchmen, among others, have contributed: Pierre Baudin, Ferdinand Buisson, Alfred Capus, editor-in-chief of *Le Figaro*; Maurice Donnay, Joseph Reinach, Pastor Charles Wagner, Monsignor Baudrillart, Antonin Mercié, president of the Société des Artistes Français, and Alfred Roll, president of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts. Monsieur Bonnat is perhaps best known to the older American artists as the "Patron" of his own atelier, before he became a *chef d'atelier* at the Beaux-Arts, a period covering the years from about 1865 to 1882, during which he had numerous pupils from the United States who have always held him in high esteem and affectionate remembrance. Now at the advanced age of eighty-two years, still vigorous and indefatigable, carrying the highest official honors ever conferred on a French artist, he has again come into close relations with us as the president of the *Fraternité des Artistes*, the great organization formed in Paris by the members of the art societies there for the relief of the families and dependents of artist-soldiers at the front. His tributes of recognition on behalf of our French confrères and the people of France for the work we have done in America in relieving distress, are marked by deep feeling and many warm-hearted expressions of the most appreciative gratitude. In one of the letters I received from him during the past summer he writes: "I am very glad that the French Government has favorably acted upon our suggestion to pay homage to our American confrères by appointing a certain number of them Honorary Attachés and members of the Committee of Patronage of the French Commission to the Exposition at San Francisco. Nothing can bind closely enough the bonds that an education and an ideal common to us both have created between us for the greater welfare of humanity." In another letter: "The torment and the crisis will pass; peace will be born again and the sorrows will be forgotten. Only the fine actions will remain, and nothing can ever efface those that your fraternal hand has engraved on the depths of our hearts. Be proud of it and again accept our warmest thanks." M. Bonnat's prominent part, sharing the honors of the occasion with M. Gabriel Hanotaux, in the great demonstration last spring, of the artistic and literary world of Paris at the Sorbonne at which, under the patronage of the Government, the finest tributes were paid to the United States, is recorded in full in the same issue of *La Renaissance* that contains his own article on the future of French art.

W. A. C.

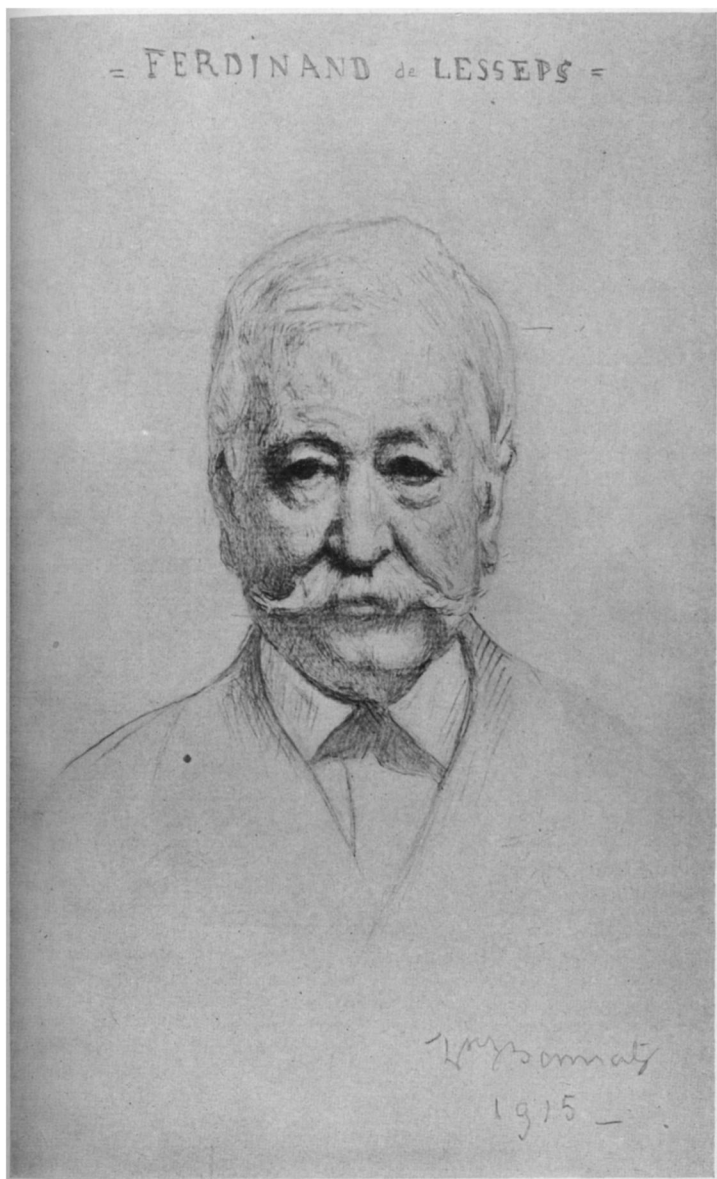
MONSIEUR LÉON BONNAT

SINCE 1905 M. Léon Bonnat has been director of the *Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts*, a position in which he succeeded the sculptor Paul Dubois, after having been for more than twenty years one of its professors and *chefs d'atelier*. He fills this high position with a special authority which is due to his long, hard-working and glorious career, a career that has been crowned with the highest distinctions: the medal of honor at the Salon, a chair in the Academy of Fine Arts, the presidency and, later, the honorary presidency of the Société des Artistes Français; the presidency of the Council of National Museums, the grand Cross of the Legion of Honor, etc. Among all his titles, which are numerous, there is one of which he may feel especially proud because it has not been possessed by other artists, that of membership of the Council of the Legion of Honor. He has others more modest and less spectacular, perhaps, but not less honorable, which he might make much of if he were affected with vanity, seeing that they testify in the highest degree to the respect, esteem and admiration bestowed upon him by his fellow artists, such as the presidency

of this *Fraternité des Artistes* whose benevolent activities are so far-reaching and so efficient. There is no one among all those interested in its work who does not acclaim him in the place he occupies at the head of this great association for help and relief, to which he brings a constant devotion and which he directs with masterly knowledge and tact. This word of mastership is brought to mind again when one speaks of this famous painter who has been the instructor of so many artists and who remains their master, "Le Maître"—though with less formality and more in the sense of a great family, they call him "Le Patron." He continues to be for them a friend to be depended on, a guide that they know that they may follow without fear of taking a wrong road, a counsellor whose words they have always found profit in heeding, and where it is necessary, remembering that he is their "Patron," he never hesitates to use his influence in their favor, generously and devotedly, to shield them from injustice or the machinations of coteries. For him nothing is higher than art, to which he has consecrated his whole life, pushing his devotion to it even to endowing his native town, Bayonne, with a museum which will hold the rich collections he has

*We are indebted to Mr. William A. Coffin, N. A., Chairman of the American Artists' Committee of One Hundred, having in charge the Relief Fund for the Families of French Soldier-Artists, for the translation of this article by M. Léon Bonnat, as well as for the prefatory note signed with his initials.

—The Editor.



SKETCH OF FERDINAND DE LESSEPS BY LEON BONNAT

ONE OF THE SERIES OF DRAWINGS RECENTLY PRESENTED BY THE

ARTISTS OF FRANCE TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

NOW IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART AT WASHINGTON

patiently formed and also, let us hope, those of his own works which he has never consented to part with. He might well, on the pediment of this museum, have inscribed the celebrated dictum of Ingres, which may be read on that great painter's monument by Eugene Guillaume, in the vestibule of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts: "Drawing is the probity of art." It was, perhaps, in remembrance of this text which he, in his turn, has made the governing rule of his artistic efforts, that he painted an admirable portrait of Ingres which is destined to a place in the *Musée Bonnat* at Bayonne. This text, at any rate, so fine in its gem-like precision of phrase, is a basic principle in the opinions of M. Léon Bonnat, speaking from the point of view of director of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, which are set forth in his consideration of the future of Art after the War.

"I HAVE nothing to ask for our art," said M. Bonnat, "other than that it shall remain French, or at least in so far as it may have ceased to be French it may come back to that. Would you say that I am too optimistic? I would reply to that, then, that as a matter of fact the German evil has not up to now, as some seem to think, produced in our art any infection that need be taken very seriously. I know very well that in Paris itself, you can see various specimens of architecture which are the latest thing in the worst style of Berlin or Munich; that some few of our sculptors have, with sorry results, taken up with the astounding extravagances of Germanic statue-making, foolishly smitten with a liking for the heavy, the enormous and the ugly in so-called art; that not all of our painters have escaped the Teutonic influence, inasmuch as we have cubists and futurists; that a number of our decorators and craftsmen have gone beyond the Rhine to seek models of their "modern style" and their "art nouveau," those lines that are either too rigid or too grotesquely complicated; those gross and clumsy forms which they have vainly tried to acclimate in France. But in reality our art has not been more than very slightly contaminated by the baneful taste of Germany.

"Look, for example, at cubism and futurism: those aberrations! Who took them

seriously? Nobody! Some of our young men, perhaps, have pretended by snobbism, by the mania for the exotic, to take up with this folly. How many of them are there and in whose collections can you see their 'works,' their caprices and incomprehensible productions? It appears, indeed, that cubism was born among us here, but that it found its market elsewhere . . .

"It is true that with us, in a very small coterie, the cubists and the futurists were once lauded to the skies, but we must leave in this infatuation, which was purely artificial, a good sized place for the *parti-pris*, for a *parti-pris* like that, for instance, that the Italians obeyed when they pretended to find vast pleasure in the music of Wagner. Some twenty years ago at the time when Italy, official and intellectual Italy at least, had been won over to German influence through the policy of Crispi, I was present one day in a theatre in Venice, at a representation of one of the music dramas of the Tetralogy, which one I do not now remember. The auditors, especially those who occupied the boxes and the dearest seats, applauded wildly and I asked myself how the Italians could enjoy to such a point of enthusiasm a form of music so opposed to that which they most loved and which, side by side with passages of incomparable beauty, contains other parts marked by a barbarous sort of brutality that would seem to be odious to Italian ears. When we were coming out, walking beside two Italians who were exchanging their impressions of the performance, I heard one of them ask:

"Ti piace? (Does it please you?)"

"Come la morte! (Like death),' replied the other.

"Like death! Nevertheless they had, I believe, applauded like the others because Wagner was German and at that time Italy was Germanophile with Crispi. I wrote to Gounod and told him about this amusing bit of snobbism and afterward during several years, he never met me but he said 'Come la Morte.'

"Like Death! So may Frenchmen admire cubism and futurism, at the bottom of which there is but a void, death, the non-existent, as the German philosophers have it. Thank Heaven! The time for these idiocies is past and it will not come back

again. In any case, at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, which the cubists and the futurists wish to ignore, we have always ignored cubism and futurism, and our students have never seemed to show the slightest desire to make their acquaintance, no more than the "art nouveau" and the "modern style." It is even interesting to note that, like our French students, the foreign students have shown no inclination either to turn towards these barbaric novelties. They have perceived of themselves all their inanity and they have remained faithful to us; to us, who, in our teaching find inspiration in our lasting traditions upon which all art is founded. We have, for our part, maintained the research for form and respect for drawing. We believe that there is no art where there is no study, reflection, meditation, composition; that where there is no idea there can be no subject. Our instruction has been sneered at, it has been thought it could be broken down in terming it "academic," with the *sous-entendu* that the academic and death are synonymous; as if form for the artist were not his life itself and as if drawing were not his salvation.

"It is of little importance, however, that the jesters have deluged us with sarcasm wherein you may find an avowal of impotence. We think that we have done our duty in bending our best efforts to hand to our students, who will be our successors, the torch that we ourselves received from our elders. Drawing and form: from those foundations we never stray; we cannot, we ought not to, because they are the conditions absolutely requisite to eternal beauty; and from antique art to contemporary, in passing through all the great epochs: gothic art, the French and Flemish primitives, the Italian Renaissance, our classic art of the last three centuries, it is by form and drawing alone that the world has been enriched with so many masterpieces. We have had to wait until the present day to see their necessity and even their utility denied. And by whom? By the cubists and the futurists. Is it worth while to say more?

On the other hand we have the satisfaction of knowing that if at home certain people, those I have just spoken of, have made a sort of campaign against our traditions and consequently against our in-

struction, we receive full justice abroad. What brings to our school so many young men from every part of the world? Isn't it because they believe that our teaching, being the most purely classical, they judge it to be the best? And why are these young men, after returning to their own countries, so proud to call themselves students of our school? Isn't it because experience has made them feel the value of our instruction to which they owe in great part what they have gained; their success, their celebrity and sometimes their fortune? Ask them and they will tell you that it is a highly valued title in the eyes of their compatriots, that of student at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. Have we not a striking proof of the good souvenir they have cherished of our school and the teaching they received, of their masters and their comrades, in the admirable zeal they have shown throughout the past year in coming to the aid of our artists? If the *Fraternité des Artistes* has been able to relieve so many cases of suffering and misery, lighten the load of so many unfortunates, it owes it above all to the sentiments of esteem and recognition that the Americans who have been pupils of our school, have retained for their alma mater. It is to one of our former American students, Mr. Coffin, that the initiative is due that brought about the exhibition of the works of painters and sculptors of the United States some months ago at New York for the benefit of the artist victims of the war and that had such a remarkable success. Nothing could show better, I think, the value of our education, not only in an artistic but, I may well say, in the moral sense also, of our Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

"We may therefore, from a fact in itself so honorable and so flattering for our teaching, draw a favorable augury for our art. On the one hand, in France, we see it, finally rid of that influence which, outside of the Ecole, had a tendency to deflect it from its course, setting itself more determinedly than ever to follow our high traditions and, on the other hand, we have a right to hope that abroad, and particularly in the United States, it will hold without contestation the foremost place in the influences that may govern the younger artists."